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THE PLAIN TRUTH ABOUT ASIATIC LABOR.

BY THE HON. JOHN BARRETT, UNITED STATES MINISTER TO SIAM.

THAT the world demands the truth—devoid of romance and speculation—about Asiatic labor and competition is evident, if the press of America and Europe reflect public interest.

This is natural. Here is a question that may concern everyone. The possibilities of Asiatic labor as a competitor may involve not only the commercial and economic, but the social, development of all nations. Labor is a vital portion of society's organism. Any derangement of the former immediately affects the latter.

To be more specific, we are brought face to face with the staggering question : What influence will the millions of continental Asia exert in shaping material and moral history, if they soften their rigidity of character and become a malleable and adaptive force like the Japanese ; if they evolve from a heterogeneous into a homogeneous factor in production, and learn to be expert producers and competitors as well as extensive consumers ?

It is a matter of breadwinning. It implies a fiercer struggle for existence. It suggests another application of the stern principle of the survival of the fittest.

I am not an alarmist. I prefer sense to sensation. These prefatory statements are simply plain terms intended to attest the importance of the subject. I will even admit that from data at hand, covering several years' observation and study, I am inclined to be more optimistic than pessimistic in my view of the future, but this discussion shall not be prejudiced by my hopes.

In telling the truth of the situation there can be no better beginning than the exposing of untruths. I refer to the grossly exaggerated and most injurious reports that have appeared in leading American papers and have been copied without limit over the land. Before me now are several illustrations.

The bicycle and button stories are the worst offenders. Originating as usual in interviews with alleged authorities, they were copied and commented upon from San Francisco to New York. They were discussed in a hundred Chambers of Commerce. They were the subject of congressional debate. They stated that Japanese bicycles would soon be sold in the United States as low as twelve dollars, gold, and that cheap Japanese buttons were flooding our markets at such prices that competition was absolutely hopeless. What are the facts? First, there is no bicycle factory in Japan that has yet turned out a wheel that an American buyer would even look at, much less ride, for less than fifty dollars, gold; second, there is no plant that can turn out over 150 wheels in a year; third, Japan cannot yet successfully compete against the cheap buttons of Austria and Germany in her own markets, and imports large quantities; fourth, neither consular invoices nor Custom-House records show any importations at the valuations claimed of buttons into the United States either then or recently, or is there any establishment in Japan which can produce them at those rates.

These two instances are the more important of many. To those who are skeptical I say: Do not believe these wonderful reports until they are verified in the official government returns of imports, which any one can obtain.

By exposing these fallacies I do not wish to be understood as anticipating my other conclusions. My only purpose is to correct impressions which are absolutely unwarranted—impressions that have been too generally accepted. Were they true, I would not only admit them, but strive to analyze them and describe the labor itself.

What are the facts of Asiatic capability and what may give us cause of apprehension and arouse fear of severe competition will be presently discussed.

Having cleared our vision of some hazy conceptions, we can now consider well-defined operations. Although Japan has so far completely distanced China in her manufacturing strides, the latter presents, perhaps, the most interesting field. In studying China's efforts, there is the ever-present thought that these numberless millions may become a powerful manufacturing people. Despite the conservative spirit that rules supreme from Canton to Peking, despite the fact that we cannot record

for China such wonderful achievements as those of Japan in the last decade, we can recapitulate resources and opportunities unlimited, and pause to consider what will come if she starts on a similar line, either alone or under guidance. Great bodies may move slowly, but the avalanche and tidal wave show that they can move rapidly and irresistibly. China to-day is the greatest riddle of all nations. No statesman, no diplomat, no philosopher, no historian, dares prophesy with full certainty as to her future. It is useless, therefore, for me to speculate on what she may do as a manufacturing land, but I can describe the actual conditions of the present. From them each person can draw his own conclusion.

Shanghai and Hankow are the only two points in China proper where large modern manufacturing plants are established and in operation. These cities are respectively the New York and Chicago of China. Shanghai is the gateway to the great, rich Yang-tse-Kiang Valley. It is growing with the rapidity of some of our Western cities. Its foreign section would do credit to a prosperous home port, with its imposing buildings and well-kept streets. For a manufacturing center its location is unsurpassed. There are miles and miles of deep-water frontage. The largest steamers and ships are constantly leaving for all parts of the world. Coasting steamers touch at every port in China, Korea, Japan, Formosa, the Philippines, Java, and Siam. River craft equal to those of the Hudson and Mississippi run regularly 600 miles up the Yang-tse to Hankow, and connect with smaller vessels that go 400 miles beyond, to Ichang, which in turn connect with junks that proceed 400 miles further, to the new treaty port of Chunking, where the United States have recently established a consulate.

I give this much attention to Shanghai because not only is it the leading port of the Far East—not counting Hong Kong and Singapore, which are British colonies—but, in the opinion of the best informed authorities, it will become the great central manufacturing point of the Pacific seas, even surpassing ultimately Osaka in Japan. As evidence of its present business and of the reasonableness of this prophecy, it is well to remember that nearly 3,000 merchant steamers cleared from the port of Shanghai in 1894.

Hankow, as intimated above, occupies a position in China so

similar to that of Chicago in America, that it must become the chief distributing and manufacturing point of interior China. It already is the principal tea-centre, and it has a foreign section whose extent and condition attest the importance of the city.

The number and size of modern manufactories in Shanghai will surprise those who have not studied this question nor personally investigated the plants. As one passes by or through them he could easily imagine himself in Fall River or Manchester, were it not for the laborer himself, *who, in his wage price, is the very secret of their success.* There are six large cotton-spinning mills with 125,000 spindles either working or about ready for operation. There are eight cotton-ginning plants, with thirty-two to seventy-two gins each, most of which are running. Twenty steam silk filatures are operated, with a reeling capacity of 24,000 bales per annum. A paper mill, which would be a credit to Holyoke or Oregon City, is doing a large business.

Are they making money, and are they competing with the goods formerly supplied entirely by import? The most convincing answer is that, in addition to six cotton mills running or about ready, three new companies, controlled by foreign capital, one of which, I am glad to say, is reported to be American, have been organized. The capital stock, averaging from \$500,000 to \$750,000, gold, was promptly subscribed, showing the confidence of investors in the opportunity. Consul-General Jernigan, in a careful report* on this subject, says:

"The larger mill will be under the general management of a well-known American firm†, and in the prospectus an estimate of the expenditure on capital account of a cotton mill of 40,000 spindles is presented: The cost of the machinery for the plant is estimated at 500,000 taels [\$380,500, gold], the land improvement at 40,000 taels [\$30,440, gold], preliminary expenses and contingencies at 10,000 taels [\$7,610, gold]. The ready value of the output of such a mill, working three hundred days, with a proper deduction for brokerage, is estimated at 1,611,900 taels [\$1,226,655, gold]. The expenditure, including raw material, cost of working, duty (if any is incurred), expense of management and depreciation in machinery and building, is estimated at 1,475,630 taels [\$1,122,954, gold], leaving a balance available for dividends of, say, 17 per cent. on 800,000 taels [\$608,800, gold]. The dividend anticipated from the expense and profit account thus stated is based upon other consid-

* See page 355, Consular Reports, November, 1895.

† Whether this American company has actually begun operations I am unable to positively state at this writing, but four new companies have been successfully floated with foreign capital, and several of their mills are in course of construction.

—J. B.

‡ Tien-Tsin taels = 76.1 cents U. S. currency at time of Consular report.

erations. In one prospectus, it is argued that experiments, made and verified by the experience of existing local mills, show that locally produced yarns are superior to Indian [Bombay] yarns, in which so great a trade has, in recent years, been established; and there is no reason why such yarns should continue to be imported when similar yarns can be manufactured at Shanghai, and of a superior grade."

A cardinal point to remember, in studying the possibilities of this competition, is the readiness of native Chinese capital to embark in these schemes. Nearly all the mills now running belong to Chinese. Capital from the north and south and interior is pouring into Shanghai for similar investment. It is erroneous to suppose that the individual Chinese capitalist is stubbornly conservative. It is the government, the great official system, that stands like a stone wall in the way of the Westerner; and yet I cannot accept the sweeping assertion that the Chinese government is unalterably opposed to foreign innovations. On my last visit to China I saw many unmistakable signs to the contrary.

But the labor itself is the chief feature of this industrial renaissance. The highest wage that I discovered paid in the Shanghai cotton mills to a native male employee was 50 cents, silver ($26\frac{1}{2}$ cents gold), per day, the lowest 12 cents, silver ($6\frac{1}{2}$ cents gold), while the average was about 20 to 34 cents, silver ($10\frac{1}{2}$ to 18 cents gold). None of these sums included food. The wage of 50 cents per day was not paid to more than 10 men in 1,000. The wage of 12 cents per day was paid to coolies who did the unskilled common work about the factories. Where women were employed, they received even less than the men, or from 5 to 20 cents, silver. In some establishments wages depended on the "piece" scale. The employees generally had a healthy, vigorous look, as if life had no great cares. They were cheerful and, in most instances, attentive to work. The more skilled would glance at me as if to say: "You foreigners may have made these machines, but we can show you how to run them!"

The observer is especially impressed as he watches these thousands of Chinese laborers going in and out of these mills at shifting hours. Nothing that human beings do more resembles the action of bees in a hive. Then, again, they seem like part of a great stream that has no beginning and no ending, flowing from one sea to another—coming as they do from a reserve of countless millions. One doubts if a strike could ever succeed with hungry thousands to draw from for every one that goes out.

Face to face with the problem, you think, you argue, you calculate, you imagine whether the wages of these men will ever be high enough to remove that omnipresent spectre of "cheap Asiatic labor." At one moment you have the question all carefully settled on theories of skilled labor becoming scarce, of new associated conditions of life, of higher cost of living, of labor organizations and strikes, of this and that change in society; the next moment you despair of a solution, as you ponder on those same unending millions, on the cheap vegetable diet, which, even in foreign lands, the Chinese does not forsake, on his capacity to save money from pay that would not supply a meager portion of an American laborer's absolute necessities, and on the supreme lack of ambition among the masses, whose plodding nature, it would seem, all the electricity in the world could not cause to experience the slightest twinge.

Perhaps the most interesting labor experiment—I say experiment advisedly—in China, I found in Wuchang, the capital of Hupeh Province, in the heart of China, the home of the celebrated Viceroy Chang Chih Tung, and opposite Hankow, on the Yangtse. Here is an immense establishment controlled by the Viceroy, employing 3,500 hands, running 40,000 spindles. It occupies four large buildings, with two more in course of construction, lighted by electricity and heated by steam, constructed of pressed brick, with corrugated-iron roofs, provided with machinery of the latest design, and powerful engines. The dimensions of the two largest structures were respectively 510 by 327 feet, and 528 by 406 feet. This is the splendid equipment of cotton mills in the interior of a land which most Americans think is the home of only primitive industry—an equipment of which the richest cotton-mill owners of England or New England could be proud.

Employees in such a factory in Massachusetts would earn \$1.25 to \$4, gold, per day. Employees in this factory in Hankow or Wuchang, to the number of 3,500, receive on an average 150 cash, or 15 cents, silver, per day; that is, only 8 cents, gold! And the Viceroy was thinking of reducing the wages because the mills were not profitable! The manager, an Englishman, stated that they did not pay. Another authority said this was because the Viceroy, for political reasons, did not want them to pay. That is why I call the mills an experiment—the Viceroy has not

yet decided whether he wishes them to prosper or not. Here, again, the laborers appeared faithful, contented, and attentive. Few requests were made for increase of wages, but if a man was so rash he was immediately replaced by one of the city's 800,000 outside. The manager made a declaration that should be considered : one American hand will tend six looms while a Chinese will tend only one. On that basis, multiply eight cents, gold, by six, and we have a daily wage of only forty-eight cents. Little consolation there !

The output of Chinese mills is chiefly yarn ; but some serges, twills, drills, and brocades are manufactured. None of the latter varieties can compare favorably yet with the common American and British products. The yarn is not equal to that imported from Great Britain, but it is often superior to that of India. There are usually a few foreigners employed at high salaries in charge of the mills, but they will be gradually replaced by natives in the native-owned plants. I used to be of the opinion that the greater portion of the raw cotton must come from America, but, as I went up and down the Yang-tse-Kiang valley and saw its limitless capabilities for cotton production, I was forced in a measure to change my opinion. The American cotton is superior to the Chinese cotton, however, and prominent manufacturers assured me that, were the Nicaragua Canal constructed, there would be a large permanent import into China from New Orleans and other Gulf ports, and especially into Japan, in far greater quantities than now.

As illustrating the fact that labor and manufacturing are becoming diversified in China, note should be taken of the immense sugar refineries of Hong Kong, second only in size and output to those of the Sugar Trust in America, where several thousand Chinese are employed at less than 35 cents, silver, each, per day, and supplying the Oriental market ; of the great docks at Hong Kong, where hundreds of skilled mechanics work for less than 40 cents, silver, per day, and repair vessels more cheaply than can be done in America and Europe ; of the extensive modern iron works and arsenals at Shanghai and Hanyang (near Hankow), where over 4,000 men, when there is work to be done, labor at an average of 20 cents, silver, per day.

All of these mean competition. That is axiomatic. What can be made in China will not be imported. It is at present,

however, competition limited to its surroundings. It is defensive, not offensive, competition. If it succeeds in defensive tactics, as it were, will it succeed in offensive? If it can do so much at home, will it invade foreign fields? These questions I am not expected in this article to discuss. Perhaps the advocates respectively of protection and free trade can argue the issue and solve the riddle.

In this paper I give as much attention to China as to Japan. I believe that danger, if danger there is or is to be, lies in China far more than in Japan. This may be contrary to common opinion, but thorough investigation on the ground convinces me that it is true. To-day for the same work wages are higher in Japan than in China. The supply of labor in Japan is more limited now and always will be. Wages in Japan have a strong tendency to advance; in China they have not. Living is cheaper in China than in Japan. The Japanese are more ambitious than the Chinese and less satisfied with small pay. Raw material of most varieties is cheaper in China and nearer at hand than in Japan; while in the practical application of the principles of both demand and supply China has the advantage of Japan.

A few doubts as to China's policy removed, a few political clouds cleared away, a few more concessions and rights granted to foreigners, and we may witness an industrial development in China that will equal and surpass that of Japan. Capital will be ready, and it will not confine itself to the present narrow limits.

Japan in July boasted of sixty-five cotton-mills with approximately one million spindles. In 1893 there were forty; in 1890, thirty; in 1888, twenty. Osaka is the central point, and it presents a most modern business-like appearance, with its large factories and lofty chimneys. Aside from cotton-mills, there are many other industries, of which the most interesting are the new watch and brush factories. From a personal inspection of the leading manufactories, and careful inquiry of the owners and managers, I learned the following facts: The highest wages paid to native employees in the cotton-mills are seventy-five cents, silver, per day, the lowest five cents (female labor); the average twenty-five cents for fairly-skilled male labor and eighteen cents for similar female labor. Large numbers of women and children earn only five to ten cents. In the brush-mak-

ing establishment I counted one hundred women who were earning at piecework only seven cents per day, and yet they worked long hours. The watch and clock factory is not a large establishment and the wages are higher. Some employees received as much as a dollar, while the majority earned about forty cents. In a dozen miscellaneous industrial plants other than those named, wages ranged from fifteen cents to eighty cents, with an average of thirty-five cents. In Kobe's celebrated match factories several hundred women and children were working with extraordinary despatch and skill and earning by piecework only five cents a day.

The average number of hands employed in the six leading Osaka cotton mills is 820 women and 390 men, a total of 1,200. The women outnumber the men in the majority of mills two and a half to one, and four to one in a few. In the great Kanegafuchi plant, at Tokyo, the women outnumber the men four to one. In this establishment the wages of the women were about half that of the men. In the Osaka Company, at Osaka, which has a capital of 1,200,000 yen and 37,513 spindles, there are employed 600 men besides women, and the wages of the former are one-third more than those of the latter. At Miye the female employees numbered 1,700 and the male 625. This may be a feature of Japanese labor that will have a vital bearing on the future. Many employers informed me that, besides being cheaper, the women gave less trouble, were more faithful, and quicker.

Eight representative establishments at Osaka have a total capitalization of 4,580,000 yen (\$2,427,400, gold), run 162,000 spindles, employ 10,000 hands, work in shifts twenty-two of the twenty-four hours for 320 days of the year, and sell the yarn at an average price of 80 yen for 48 kwan (400 pounds), or 10 cents, gold, per pound.* These same companies paid handsome dividends last year, the lowest being eight per cent. and the highest 26 per cent.

It is not true that the watch and clock factories of Japan are making goods cheaper than those of similar quality in America. They can control their own market in cheap clocks, but they cannot export at a profit. In watches they cannot yet compete successfully in both cheapness and quality with those imported

* One kwan equals about $8\frac{1}{2}$ pounds avoirdupois.

from Switzerland and America. The brush plant in Osaka, however, is finding its great and exclusive market in the United States. New York buys nearly all of the output, and the demand keeps five hundred hands busy at average wages of twenty cents, silver, per day. This company shipped tooth, hair, and nail brushes, valued at \$18,000, gold, to the United States in the last three months of 1895.

Some miscellaneous wages in and about Yokohama which I authenticated are as follows, in gold: Carpenters, 25 to 50 cents per day; compositors, 25 to 45 cents; tailors, 25 to 65 cents; plasterers, 26 to 40 cents; tea workers, 30 to 40 cents; farm laborers, \$1.50 to \$3 per month; personal household servants for foreigners, \$8 to \$10 per month—all of which are a great advance over two years ago; and they bid fair to go 50 to 100 per cent. higher in the next two years. Labor and wages in the silk, lacquer, porcelain, screen, matting, tea, curio, and other industries, which have always been characteristic of the country, I do not discuss beyond noting that the work is chiefly done by piece, not in great factories, but in private houses. So true is this of Japan, that the entire land might be regarded as one vast workshop with infinite subdivisions.

Before concluding this discussion it is necessary, in order to answer questions that are being continually asked concerning Asiatic labor, to note a few other general and specific features.

First. As to the measure of present and future Japanese competition with American products, the quarterly and annual returns of exports to the United States show that it has not yet reached an alarming stage, and our trade with Trans-Pacific lands has never yet attained such proportions as to be materially affected. The only imports similar to American products, such as brushes of all kinds, matches, carpets, rugs, paper, umbrellas, cotton piece goods, did not amount to over \$100,000, gold, in the last quarter of 1895. Silk imports for the same period were approximately \$3,500,000, gold, of which silk goods proper were only about \$450,000. Matting was valued at \$700,000, gold. Future competition depends so much on labor conditions, the development of commercial exchange, and the laws of demand and supply, that I cannot agree with those who declare we have nothing to fear any more than with those who predict the ruinous effects of Japanese competition.

Second. The advance of cost of labor in Japan is marked.* The last twelve months have witnessed a greater rise than that of the preceding twelve years. The war, the enlargement of both army and navy, and the general demand for all classes of labor growing out of the country's speedy development are chiefly responsible. Manufacturers will soon be compelled to face the results of their own competition. Every new establishment tends to increase wages. Skilled labor is not obtained in a day in Japan any more than in America.

Third. Labor is organizing, but no such organization exists as in America. The organization of employers is perfect, but that of employees is very imperfect. Extensive organization is so new that labor's conception of it is yet crude. There are signs that it is coming and that it will appreciate its power. Guilds of which we hear so much do not include, as a rule, the ordinary laborer, unless in house or piece work. Boycotting is a common agency employed in Japan. It is a thoroughly understood principle in both Japan and China, and is used with great power whenever occasion demands. The coolie riots and strikes in Hong Kong and the guild-directed boycotts of Yokohama attest this characteristic. Conditions of government and society in Japan are adverse to the popularity and utility of deliberate strikes. The laborers themselves are as well treated as in any land in the world, considering conditions of life, are not morose, seem satisfied, and hence do not take to perfected organization. They are satisfied with less ambitious schemes. The wages and surroundings, however, that give the Japanese laborer sufficiency and contentment would mean poverty and unhappiness for the American laborer. The cost of living for the masses in Japan is less than in any other important land, except China. As this is so influential a factor in the price of labor, it must be remembered in discussing the possibilities of cheap Asiatic labor. The cost of keeping a big, healthy laborer well fed does not exceed ten cents, silver, a day in Japan and five cents in China, and it probably averages much less.

Fourth. The same crowding into cities and the same tendency to give up former conditions of living and labor are noticeable in Japan as in America and Europe. Piece work in the little homes

* See recent reports of Minister Dun, Consul-General McIvor, and Consul Connolly.

is being abandoned for factories in cities. Who can announce with assurance that social problems are not to arise where 40,-000,000 people suddenly find themselves transformed from a home-staying, piece-working, hand-making, and agricultural people to a restless, factory-filling, machinery-assisting, modern manufacturing people ?

Fifth. There is a "boom" on in Japan—a boom in floating and establishing numberless varieties of manufacturing plants from Nagasaki to Hakodate. This may lead to overproduction and financial disaster. Let us hope not, for the proud little kingdom deserves a better fate. But some of Japan's ablest business men acknowledge the boom and fear the consequences. Coming right after the war with China, it bears some resemblance to the remarkable American industrial development following the Civil War.

Sixth. The haste and effort to make large profits have resulted oftentimes in producing a poor quality of goods and the consequent loss of markets. The Japanese manufacturers, as a whole, have not yet learned to maintain a permanent high standard. It is claimed that they do not plan for the future. They think too much of the present. This is used as an argument against their competitive capability, and may prove valid if a change is not accomplished, but it would seem that time would remedy the defect.

Seventh. The Japanese and Chinese home demand is to-day different from that of America and Europe, and it may be some time before Japan and China can provide goods, especially for the foreign market, which can compete with the home supply of those foreign countries. The visitor to Yokohama is continually reminded, moreover, that he should buy his clothing there, especially shirts, because prices are apparently so much less than in San Francisco and New York. If the enterprising traveller will go to half the trouble in America to read the advertisements in local papers, he will find that he can obtain shirts of equal quality at the same or a less price. Perhaps a man can purchase a dress suit in Yokohama for twenty dollars, gold, but he will get a twenty-dollar fit, and the first evening he wears it at the club or theatre at home will be also the last one. Nor can a Japanese tailor make an American laboring man's suit for ten dollars, gold, that can equal in

wear what can be purchased for that sum in a hundred Chicago clothing stores. If large wholesale clothing manufacturing plants are established in the place of the present small back-rooms, it is possible that cheap clothing may be extensively exported.

Eighth. The Japanese government is taking one step which, perhaps, more than any other single influence, will enable her manufacturers to compete in foreign lands, and which exhibits an enterprise that the United States might emulate if it would revive its old marine and commercial supremacy; the subsidizing of steamship lines running to the Pacific Coast of the United States, Australia, and South America. In a few months the Nippon Yusen Kaisha will send its first steamer either to Puget Sound, Portland, or San Francisco.

Ninth. The effect of the new treaties will be closely watched. In two years more the old ones will be abrogated and foreign capital can establish its own industries wherever it pleases. What will be the direct effect on labor and competition it is difficult to outline beyond the fact that labor should advance, competition become more keen, and possibly also more attention will be given to the markets of Europe and America. I advise American capital to watch the field.

Tenth. I would not discourage American exporters from entering the Trans-Pacific field. There is a great opportunity, and it should be improved. If this paper suggests specific questions pertaining thereto, an answer may be found in the March number of the *NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, where I endeavored in plain terms to show that opportunity.

The eyes of the world are on the Far East. A coronation at Moscow, an invasion of the Soudan, a massacre in Armenia, a battle in Cuba, cannot hide the prevailing interest. Marshal Yamagata and Li Hung Chang were received everywhere in harmony with this sentiment. It is plain to be seen that the great issue of the Far East is not involved in the question what is the future of Korea or Siam, of Japan as a military power, of China's governmental possibilities, but what has the Western world to fear from the competitive labor of Asia's millions.

Some facts of the present are herein submitted.

Whatever policy the United States may see fit to follow, American interests in Trans-Pacific lands trust that it will be favorable to the upbuilding of the nation's commerce and trade.

JOHN BARRETT.